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Foreign policy

African jungle

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The recent fighting in the Shaba province of Zaire, formerly Katanga, has lit up unresolved differences of opinion within the American government about its African policy, and, more generally, about American readiness or reluctance to intervene with troops abroad. The "government", for these purposes, includes congress, as well as a divided administration. Indeed, the running debate of the week got started when President Carter complained in a meeting with leading members of congress about congressional restraints on the president's ability to take military actions abroad. About the same time units of the 82nd airborne division stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, a "quick-reaction" force, were put on alert. These soldiers, as it turned out, were not needed, after all, to help rescue American civilians in the fighting zone. It is far from clear that they were ever really meant to be dispatched in the first place. But the alert was the first signal of a more assertive line being taken in the administration, from the White House at least.

On Friday, May 19th, the White House announced that 18 American transport planes would help in the airlift of French and Belgian troops to the area. Neither American weapons nor combat troops were involved. The White House, all the same, called this a "military" mission.

By this stage it was plain to even the dimmest observer that the White House was trying to make a point. The day before Mr Fidel Castro had sent an unusual, personal message to the president, denying Cuban involvement in the attack from Angola on Shaba province. The administration insisted that Cubans had trained the former Katangan rebels in the invasion force which was armed with Cuban-supplied Russian weapons. The stiffer American response was the sort for which Mr Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's national security adviser, has sought for some time. Though he himself was out of the country, on a trip in China discomfiting the Russians, his immediate staff was plainly delighted at the turn of events.

On Sunday, May 21st, Mr Andrew Young, the American ambassador to the United Nations, and hitherto a reliable spokesman for the United States's policy in Africa, said on television that he doubted whether congressional restraints on the president were unduly onerous. He returned to his theme, supported inside the state

administration might have a tendency to exaggerate the strategic importance of Cuban troops in Africa.

Next day, to add to the mounting sense of confusion, Mr Young said he did share the president's concern with congressional restraints, but felt there was enough support for Americans to do openly in Africa whatever was needed. Meanwhile the state department had released an eight-page list of congressional restraints on military action abroad. Chief among those of which Mr Carter complained were the amendment to the foreign aid bill obliging the president to inform congress of covert operations conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Clark amendment to the 1976 Arms Export Control Act prohibiting any sort of military help, open or covert, for operations in Angola.

The events of the week have convinced the author of that amendment, Senator Dick Clark of Iowa, that the United States is seeking to becoming involved again in Angola. It is believed that the director of the CIA, Admiral Stansfield Turner, and Mr Brzezinski's deputy, Mr David Aaron, proposed to him a way round his amendment for getting arms to opponents of the Angolan government through third countries. Their idea was to tie down Cuban troops who are helping the regime of Mr Agostinho Neto. Mr Clark was not impressed, apparently, and thought the scheme broke the spirit of the law.

This is only the latest episode in the unfolding of the Carter administration's African policy. It is unlikely to be the last. It shows that Mr Carter is leaning towards Mr Brzezinski's advice that the

United States must stand up, somehow, to the Cuban presence in Africa. But it also reveals that the long debate over African policy as a whole is unresolved. Mr Young and the state department, who have had the upper hand so far, have come under test with their view that steady pressure for majority rule in southern Africa is the United States' most urgent task. That was broadly the message of President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia whose visit to Washington coincided with the Shaba fighting. Mr Vance's public role has so far not been very definite, one way or the other, and could be influential. There is almost no evidence of public support for American military adventures abroad. Those in search of it could do worse than look to Iowa where Mr Clark is running, with no evident difficulty so far, for re-election to the senate.

Congressional opinion about foreign entanglements has, since Vietnam, been hostile. As for any shift, the first signs might come from a new committee called for on Monday by the house speaker, Mr Tip O'Neill, to look into congressional restrictions on foreign actions. The senate's influential majority leader, Senator Robert Byrd, does not think congress has tied the president's hands in ways that need changing.